

I told them that I belong to a Christian, not a counter-revolutionary church. I am a believer in God and a follower of Christ. I do not belong to a counter-revolutionary alliance, but an alliance building unity among pastors who support one another in order to serve, with greater excellence, the Cuban island. I told them that they can do with me whatever they want, but I will not stop attending church. I will give the same treatment to Christians of any denomination, as I would to any citizen, communist or not. I told them that if they want to take away my rights for having provided ... services, or going to church, so be it.

Cuban religious leader

CSW expresses deep gratitude to the Cubans who, despite great risk, carried out the firsthand documentation on which this report is based, in coordination with freedom of religion or belief defenders who have been forced into exile.

Executive summary

There was no sign in 2023 of a let up by the Cuban government in respect to the crackdown, including increasingly repressive legislation, that began in 2021 following the 11 July protests. The number of documented cases involving violations of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) remained steady, around 622, as compared to 657 in 2022, which had jumped from 272 in 2021. CSW observed a return to hardline tactics, with systematic violations of the Nelson Mandela Rules when it came to political prisoners in the form of the consistent refusal of religious visits or the right to receive religious materials, religious leaders threatened and pressured to expel the family members of political prisoners from their congregations as part of a policy of social isolation, children subjected to physical and verbal abuse at school because of their religious beliefs, religious leaders of unregistered religious groups repeatedly harassed, threatened and fined, and religious leaders of registered groups targeted for intrusive surveillance, repeat interrogations, and other pressure tactics.

Religious groups of all types, including Afro-Cuban groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants, and Roman Catholics, registered and unregistered associations, including some that belong to the Cuba Council of Churches (CCC), all reported FoRB violations. The government continued to be particularly focused on targeting religious leaders and individuals who offered spiritual or material support to families of political prisoners. Religious leaders and their congregations who attempted to respond to humanitarian needs, which have become increasingly acute in many parts of the island, were harassed, fined, and, in many cases, saw the aid they were attempting to distribute

confiscated. Those considered by the government to be dissidents were repeatedly and systematically blocked from attending religious services, usually through short term arbitrary detention. The emigration wave showed no sign of diminishing, with many of those who left Cuba citing threats of imprisonment and loss of custody of their children to the State.

Despite the efforts of the government to silence independent or critical voices, religious leaders from registered and unregistered groups alike continued to speak publicly about FoRB and other human rights violations and to be openly critical of legislation and government positions. It is notable that many Cubans who reported experiencing FoRB violations, in many cases many severe, also affirmed their intention to resist government pressure. One pastor who was threatened said:

All I am doing is my pastoral work, and my work is a commandment from the Lord. I will continue to do this work, even if it means I have to go to prison.

The government appears to still be depending on a strategy of harsh oppression and repressive laws to bring the population under as much of its control as possible. It has made it clear that there will be no political or social reform. While some Cubans, no doubt, are more cautious and many have seen no other option than to go into exile, there remain many who, even in the face of threats, harassment, and the possibility of imprisonment, continue to speak out against injustice and up for those in their communities who are suffering.

Recommendations

To the government of Cuba:

- Amend constitution and civil, administrative and criminal codes to include strengthened provisions for FoRB and other human rights in line with international law and norms on FoRB, including Article 18 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the San José Pact;
- Ratify the ICCPR and the ICESCR and ensure that authorities on every level, including Cuba Communist Party (CCP) officials, understand the provisions included in the ICCPR and the ICESCR, and ensure that they are implemented nationally, regionally and locally;
- As a member of the Human Rights Council, uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, including those relating to FoRB;
- Issue a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures, including inviting the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, as well as other thematic UN rapporteurs, to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country;

- Eliminate the requirement for religious groups to register or bring registration procedures and requirements into line with international best practice for non-discriminatory registration;
- Eliminate the Office for Religious Affairs (ORA) of the Central Committee of the CCP as it currently exists, or reform it to operate transparently within defined legal parameters and with recourse for appeal;
 - Ensure equal, transparent and non-discriminatory access to permits for renovations and building projects, religious visas, vehicle licences; and ensure legacies are handled fairly, protecting the right of individuals to leave their property to the church or denomination of their choice;
 - Streamline and reform procedures concerning the registration of church buildings, and the building and renovation of churches and other buildings for religious use, to ensure that these are applied fairly and transparently;
 - Reform procedures for the return of confiscated properties to ensure that these processes are conducted fairly and transparently;
 - Allow religious institutions, including seminaries, to operate independently and without government interference, including by protecting their right to seek accreditation and establish formal relationships with counterparts and accreditation bodies outside of Cuba;
- Allow religious associations and umbrella groups or networks to operate autonomously without pressure or interference from government or CCP officials;
- Guarantee freedom for religious leaders to carry out their work without harassment, threats or other government pressure targeting them or their families;
- Safeguard the freedom of all Cubans to assemble and worship according to their professed religion or belief;
- End the harassment, threats and imprisonment of human rights defenders, including FoRB defenders;
- Guarantee protection from discrimination on the basis of one's religion in the workplace, educational institutions and all other social and political spheres;
- Allow all religious groups to independently engage in social and humanitarian work and to hold peaceful public events free from interference and intimidation;
- End the use of government informants in religious associations and seminaries;
- Bring an end to government support of any religious group over other religious groups, ensuring that all groups are equally able to import or produce religious materials and literature; and ensure equal access for all groups to the media;
- Guarantee all prisoners, whether criminal or political, their basic human rights including FoRB as defined in the Nelson Mandela Rules.

To the European Union and Member States:

- Under the “agreed actions on cooperation in the field of human rights” announced in the EU’s press release following the EU-Cuba human rights dialogue on 24 November 2023, ensure that FoRB and related freedom of assembly violations are addressed therein. Now that a precedent has been set on concluding “agreed actions”, ensure that this practice continues in subsequent human rights dialogues.
- Demand an urgent meeting with the Cuban government under Article 85(3) of the EU-Cuba Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA), to formally investigate and review its compliance with PDCA human rights obligations – as called for by multiple recent European Parliament resolutions;
- Introduce Magnitsky sanctions on individuals responsible for human rights violations, as called for by the European Parliament in its resolutions of 16 September and 16 December 2021. This should include State Security officers and senior Office of Religious Affairs officials responsible for serious FoRB violations;
- As part of the EEAS’ consultations ahead of any EU-Cuba Human Rights Dialogue, the EU should also ensure and facilitate input from Cuban independent civil society organisations;
- The EU Delegation to Cuba and embassies of member states should maintain an open dialogue with religious leaders from all denominations and religious groups, while taking into consideration the political sensitivities under which many religious leaders must work. It should also continue to establish and maintain contact with the families of political prisoners and raise its concerns regarding continued violations of prisoners’ rights, including denial of religious rights, with the Cuban authorities;
- The EU Special Rapporteur for Human Rights, and the EU Special Envoy for the promotion of FoRB outside the EU, should request an invitation to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country and leaders of both registered and unregistered religious groups.

To the government of the United States of America:

- Raise FoRB at every opportunity, in public and in private, in any dialogue with the Cuban government, including the Office of Religious Affairs; and encourage the government to act on the recommendations listed above;
- The US Embassy in Cuba should maintain an open dialogue with religious leaders from all denominations, religious groups, and regions of the country, while taking into consideration the political sensitivities under which many religious leaders must work;
- Continue to seek ways of engaging with members of Cuban independent civil society, offering support when appropriate;

- Continue to establish and maintain contact with the families of political prisoners, and raise its concerns regarding continued violations of prisoners' rights, including denial of religious rights, with the Cuban authorities;
- The Ambassador for International Religious Freedom should request an invitation to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country and leaders of both registered and unregistered religious groups;
- The State Department should continue to closely monitor FoRB in Cuba and maintain Cuba as a CPC. All FoRB reporting should fully reflect the views of marginalized churches and faith leaders, rather than positions of religious groups that are close to the government or state officials and offices;
- The US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should request an invitation to visit Cuba with unhindered access to all parts of the country. It should also continue to closely monitor FoRB in the country and elevate Cuba to Tier 1 status in line with the serious deterioration of FoRB developments in 2022.

To the United Nations:

- As Cuba continues its role as an elected member of the Human Rights Council, the UN must urge Cuba to ratify and fully implement the treaties it has signed, including the ICCPR and ICESCR;
- Urge Cuba to amend provisions for FoRB and freedom of conscience in the constitution in line with international standards, and bring civil, administrative and penal law and regulations into line with both international law and the San José Pact;
- Urge Cuba to issue a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures, including invitations to the thematic Special Rapporteurs with mandates on FoRB, human rights defenders, torture, independence of the judiciary, and arbitrary detention, to visit Cuba with unhindered;
- Encourage staff and independent experts to continue raising violations of FoRB during bilateral meetings, as well as during treaty body reviews;
- Encourage UN Member States to raise FoRB related recommendations during Cuba's upcoming Universal Periodic Review in November 2023;
- Continue to seek ways of engaging with members of Cuban independent civil society, offering support when appropriate, and swiftly condemn all acts of intimidation or reprisal against members of civil society for cooperating with the UN.

Legal recognition and developments

Despite the 2022 creation of the new government Department for Attention to Religious Institutions and Fraternal Groups, religious leaders have told CSW that, in practice, all business continues to be conducted by the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party (CCP), which maintains a consistently antagonistic relationship with religious groups.

All requests for authorisation, from making repairs to a building to holding a public event, are decided by the ORA, an entity operating outside of any defined legal framework. The ORA habitually denies or simply fails to respond to many of these requests and there is no recourse for appeal. It awards permits, including the right to invite visitors on a required religious visa, according to the inviting religious association's perceived level of support for or cooperation with the government.

All religious groups must be registered with the Ministry of Justice to operate legally: the ORA receives the request for the registration and the government then makes the decision, with input from CCP officers. While there are some criteria for registration, for example that the association must have more than 30 members, decisions are made on an arbitrary basis in line with political considerations and are only rarely approved.

Most religious groups that existed legally prior to the 1959 Revolution maintained their official registration and as such have legal recognition. However, the registered status of some groups, like the Berean Baptists and the Jehovah's Witnesses, was arbitrarily rescinded in the 1970s. They have not been permitted to re-register, thus making them illegal. Others, such as the Afro-Cuban Free Yoruba Association, are not registered because they wish to remain independent of government influence or control. More generally, the autonomous and local nature of most Afro-Cuban religious groups, which have been present on the island for centuries, means that the majority are not registered. The majority of groups that were not present prior to 1959 but have a significant presence on the island, notably churches affiliated with the Apostolic Movement, have been refused the right to register. While all religious groups experience FoRB violations, unregistered groups are most vulnerable and suffer some of the most egregious violations, as their unregistered status means that their very existence, as well as anything they attempt to do as a religious group, is illegal.

The situation for both registered and unregistered groups deteriorated following the adoption of a new criminal code which came into force on 1 December 2022. Groups [within](#) and [outside](#) of Cuba note that the code maintains many of the problematic content of the previous code but increases the minimum sentencing for numerous offences. The criminal code covers the 'abuse of the freedom of worship' in Article 272 and criminalises anyone who, because of their religious beliefs, 'opposes the objectives of education, or the duty to work, defend the Homeland through the armed struggle when no other resources is available, to revere [Cuba's] symbols or anything else established by the Constitution of the Republic of Cuba', stipulating a prison sentence of six months to one year or a heavy fine as punishment.

Penalties for leading or belonging to an unauthorised association were increased from a few months' imprisonment to a minimum of six months and a maximum of two years for a leader and one year for a member. The same sentences are applied for leading or participating in an unauthorised meeting. The new criminal code amplifies the government's

ability to crack down on religious leaders, especially those associated with unregistered groups, and together with the limits on conscientious objection in the 2019 constitution,¹ effectively nullifies constitutional guarantees for freedom of conscience.

In addition to the criminal code, a revised family code which entered into force in 2023 strengthened the ability of the government to force religious leaders and others into compliance. Article 191 gives the government the right to remove children from their homes if their parents fail to fulfil a list of responsibilities detailed in Article 138 (ñ). These include the duties to instil in their children 'love for the Homeland, respect of its symbols, and respect for the authorities'. In 2023 CSW noted a continued increase in reported FoRB cases which included government threats to remove custodial rights from parents.

While neither the criminal code nor the family code have been applied uniformly across the island, religious leaders consistently reported being threatened with enforcement of provisions contained in either or both. Numerous leaders told CSW that they believe that the laws are applied on occasion in order to make an example of some, with the strategy that the threat of the application of the laws will be enough to subdue others.

Harassment of religious leaders

As in previous years, one of the most common FoRB violations documented in 2023 was that of harassment of religious leaders and FoRB defenders. The forms of harassment varied and included anonymous phone calls, repeated summons to appear at National Revolutionary Police (PNR) or Department of State Security (DSE) stations, interrogations, and fines. This type of FoRB violation was also manifested in actions, in some cases violent, carried out by paramilitary groups or supposed civilians, which the government took no action to investigate or stop.

Leaders of non-registered religious groups continue to experience regular harassment. CSW noted a significant increase in the number of Afro-Cuban religious groups reporting such violations. These documented cases spanned nine provinces. The behaviour of government officials was almost identical in each case, including derogatory personal insults and racist accusations that the groups were participating or encouraging criminal delinquency in their communities. Groups across the country, which have been denied permission to register a designated location for their activities and are forced to operate out of private homes, repeatedly reported officers entering their homes during religious worship, sacred rituals, and celebrations, in some cases violently, and ordering that they stop their activities.

In the second half of the year, several uniformed PNR officers, who did not otherwise identify themselves, interrupted an Abakúa initiation ceremony at the residence of an Abakúa

leader in Western Cuba. The leader confirmed that he was the owner of the property and attempted to refute the officers' claims that the objective of their ritual was to incite violence, explaining that they were following ancestral customs. The leader was then issued a summons to provide a statement the following day at the local PNR station. When he obeyed the summons, the PNR sector head warned him that an *Acta de Advertencia* – a kind of pre-arrest warrant justifying future imprisonment for specified crimes – had been issued and the leader would face prosecution for engaging in illegal rituals, which according to the sector head, had been deemed by his superiors to incite violence. The leader, once again, attempted to refute these claims but was handed the *Acta de Advertencia*, which he refused to sign.

CSW received five documented cases involving independent Yoruba groups which all took place over 6 and 7 September in Camaguey and Holguin as the groups were preparing to celebrate the Day of Oshún who is linked to the Virgin of Caridad del Cobre, Cuba's patron saint. In each case, high ranking local PNR officers entered private homes and ordered those present to stop their celebrations, noting that the houses where the groups were gathered were not authorised for religious use. In each case, the Babalawo² responded that they are forced to hold their rites in their homes as the government has refused to allow them to register a designated location for their activities. In one case, an officer informed one group that ceremonies conducted at home will no longer be tolerated, 'as they attract a large crowd and incite counter-revolution and theft'.

In one case, in Las Tunas, Las Tunas, Committee for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR) delegate Isabel Betancourt, interrupted an annual celebration of fellowship at 9pm on 13 September at the home of Babalawo Leonardo Gainza. Ms Betancourt questioned the amount of food at the celebration and accused the religious group of misusing resources and 'illicit hoarding'. When Babalawo Gainza responded that all of the food had been acquired legally, Ms Betancourt claimed that 'it did not matter and [she] would note down the names of all those present to be turned over to the Department for State Security (DSE) for further investigation'.

Similarly, on the evening of 16 December, Babalawo Leodan Puentes gathered with a group of about 20 followers in Sancti Spíritus, Sancti Spíritus for a celebratory meal on the Eve of Saint Lazarus Day. A CDR delegate who identified herself as 'Rosmeri' interrupted the gathering and demanded an explanation for the gathering of 'so many people'. Rosmeri then condemned the 'obvious expense' and 'waste' of so much food in a single meeting at a time of such need in the country. Babalawo Puentes explained that they were celebrating the Eve of Balalú-Ayé/Saint Lazarus Day as they do every year, and their food was not her concern.

Yoruba celebrations and rituals held out of doors and away from populated areas were not immune from such harassment. In the second half of the year, a number of

¹ Conscientious objection may not be invoked with the intention of evading compliance with the law or impeding another from the exercise of their rights.

² The term means 'father of secrets' and is a religious title.

Yoruba religious leaders were gathered on the banks of a river as part of a divination ceremony. PNR officers who did not identify themselves interrupted them and demanded to know who the leader of the 'absurd' ceremony was. When the main leader introduced himself, a PNR officer informed him that the authorities view him as 'just another dissident, and little by little, they will put an end to them all,' going on to order them to 'put an end to such stupidity'. Another officer accused the group of trying to get attention and encouraging their followers to support 'the counter-revolution'. The Yoruba leaders argued that while they did not have legal status as individual religious leaders, the Yoruba faith is recognised as part of Cuba's cultural patrimony and stated that they were merely peacefully following the requirements of their religion. They noted that during the entire encounter, the PNR officers kept their hands on their guns, in what the leaders interpreted as 'an obvious attempt to intimidate'. In the end the officers left, warning that the DSE would be informed, and the religious leaders carried on with their ritual.

Religious leaders representing the spectrum of religion or belief groups, including registered and unregistered associations, were repeatedly summoned to PNR and DSE facilities for interrogation. In one case, a pastor associated with the Apostolic Movement was summoned to the local PNR station in a city in eastern Cuba. The officers interrogated the pastor about his work, his church, and the number of people who meet there. They warned him that his church was illegal and associated with the 'counter-revolutionary' Apostolic Movement. The pastor responded that the church was only illegal because the government had repeatedly denied his requests to legalize it. He asked, again, for a permit to build a formal church building, as currently they meet in the open air. The officers refused and dismissed the pastor.

Religious leaders from registered religious associations were also targeted. In the first half of the year, a pastor from a historic, registered religious association in Havana received a request via text message from the municipal ORA officer to submit documents related to permits to hold religious services, urgently, to enable the municipal First Secretary of the CCP to review the renewal of a permit. The pastor noted that the same documentation had been submitted in 2019 to the Havana Provincial Justice Department. On this occasion, however, the ORA officer demanded that the submission include property records, personal information including the age of the pastor's children, and photos of the church building. The pastor told CSW that in his view this was

...a violation by the government and its dependencies, to try to limit freedom of worship and assembly. These limitations are not defined in the constitution or any 'Law of Worship.' That they include in these processes, sensitive information such as the age of my children, in my opinion, is harassment and intimidation.

Interference with religious services or activities

Religious groups also regularly saw their services and other activities interrupted. In one case, a CDR president repeatedly stood outside the Camagüey church of Apostolic Movement leader Jorge Mario Travieso, shouting insults and pro-revolutionary phrases from a megaphone during church services, making it difficult for those gathered there to hear the sermons. In another case, a CDR president in western Cuba interrupted a pastor and congregation as they were preparing humanitarian aid for those in need in their community. The CDR president told the pastor that his church is 'illegal' and warned him that he is viewed as a 'counter-revolutionary', as are the members of his church. The pastor responded that he and his congregation were trying to help those in need, and that the CDR president should support them, rather than criticise their work.

In the first half of the year, a religious leader associated with a historic but unregistered Protestant denomination was planning to host a meeting of pastors at his home. Although the event had been planned over a month in advance, the night before the meeting was to take place two individuals who did not identify themselves came to the leader's house. The individuals informed the pastor that the DSE was aware of their plans and if the meeting took place all those present would be arrested. The individuals also threatened the pastor with the confiscation of his property. The pastor felt he had no choice other than to cancel the event.

In another case, at 8am on 22 August, the Babalawo Edgar Hernández Suárez was making preparations for a Yoruba religious celebration in honour of the anniversary of one of his children receiving the faith of Changó at his home in the city of Camagüey when a PNR officer and a DSE agent - who did not identify themselves - arrived. The two officers stated that the excessive noise and blood stains on the front door were unacceptable and ordered him to put a stop to the celebration. Babalawo Hernandez Suárez pointed out that the authorities have consistently refused to give him permission to build his own building, where they could carry out their religious activities without disturbing anyone. Until then, however, he said, he and his community would be forced to practice their beliefs from his home. The officers responded by threatening him with a summons for interrogation and again ordered them to put a stop to the celebration. Babalawo Hernandez Suárez felt he had no other choice than to cancel the religious activity.

Similarly, in December, as a Yoruba Babalawo in eastern Cuba was with her co-religionists preparing an altar for a traditional cemetery in her home for the Day of Balalú-Ayé/ Saint Lazarus, the PNR Sector Chief known to the religious leader and a DSE agent who did not identify himself entered her home and demanded that they stop what they were doing. The sector chief threatened to have them arrested if they did not comply and went on to accuse them of disturbing the public order, inciting counter-revolution, and committing robberies. When the Babalawo protested, saying that all of those in attendance were known to her, none were

counter-revolutionaries or thieves, and they were all hard-working and honest, the sector chief threatened to charge her with contempt for the authorities. The Babalawo and her co-religionists were forced to cancel their celebrations.

Acute and chronic shortages across the island have led many communities of faith to respond by collecting and distributing humanitarian aid. In many cases government officers interrupted or attempted to stop such actions, claiming that they cast the State, which is unable or unwilling to do so, in a negative light. Religious leaders offering aid to the families of political prisoners were frequent targets of threat. In one case, in the first half of the year, DSE officers summoned a pastor associated with a registered religious association and interrogated him about his work visiting and providing spiritual and financial support to the families of political prisoners. The DSE officers issued the pastor an *Acta de Advertencia*, which he refused to sign, threatening him with a fine of 10,000 CUP³ and up to three years imprisonment. Later in the year, the denomination came under severe pressure from the government and stripped the pastor of some of his responsibilities because he had continued his work with the families of political prisoners.

Freedom of expression

Religious leaders across the country reported being summoned by State Security for questioning, in some cases repeatedly, in connection with positions or statements they had shared on social media and sometimes related to the content of their sermons or prayers. These frequently centred on 'conflicts' with the Family Code, with one pastor visited by the provincial president of the Federation of Cuban Women, accompanied by a DSE agent. The pastor was threatened that her husband could be sacked from his job if she did not bring her teaching into line with the Family Code, specifically in regard to women. In the final months of the year numerous Protestant pastors from both registered and unregistered religious denominations across the island were summoned for interrogation in regard to comments they had made about Israel. In each case, the pastors were told that that expressing any kind of support for Israel was unacceptable, they were ordered to stop praying for Israel or, in one case, for the 'peace of Jerusalem' and told that any commentary on the situation must be in line with the position of 'the Revolution and the CCP'.

Travel restrictions

The Cuban government continued to threaten and impose travel restrictions on specific individuals. This included restrictions imposed on those attempting to travel abroad (regulated status), those attempting to enter Cuba, and those attempting to travel freely within the country.

Travel abroad

The Cuban government continues to arbitrarily impose and lift travel restrictions affecting many Cubans, or offer

to do so, on the condition that they leave the country and not return. In one example, Lady in White Maria Cristina Labrada Varona was detained on the morning of 12 March in Havana as she was on her way to attend Mass. She was held inside a police car for almost three hours with a DSE agent who identified himself as 'Diego'. Diego informed Ms Labrada Varona that she would be permitted to receive her passport and that the travel restrictions currently imposed on her would be lifted but only if she agreed to leave Cuba permanently. Ms Labrada Varona refused.

Travel to Cuba

Cuba mandates that individuals traveling to the island in order to engage with religious groups obtain a religious visa in advance, however, the receiving Cuban religious association is required to request these visas on behalf of the visitors. Requests are submitted to the ORA which frequently uses the granting or denial of religious visas as a pressure tactic on leaders of registered religious associations. In one such case involving a registered Protestant Christian denomination, a leader received a letter late in the year from the ORA indicating that applications for religious visas for a group of individuals from the US to participate in an event had been denied. The letter stated that the denial was based on the following:

...you maintain actions and an attitude against the principles of the Revolution, because you maintain a social attitude in favour of Pastor Lorenzo Rosales, to support and help him, because you have contact and preach alongside pastors of unrecognized churches, because you are part of the Alliance of Christians of Cuba, because you actively carry out social work in your community and are not a sympathizer or promoter of our principles unlike the Cuban Council of Churches, which promotes the principles of the government and the State, we deny you the visa for your guests. If you want us to approve [a religious visa] you must follow our principles and not the principles that you are practicing.

Unregistered religious associations' requests for religious visas for are summarily denied. In one example, in May, Bishop Eduardo Batista Guibert of the Conservative Anglican Church of Cuba, an unregistered religious group, submitted a request for a religious visa for Archbishop Cesar Augusto Rozo, a citizen of Colombia. The request was denied on the basis that the group does not have legal status. Bishop Batista Guibert pointed out that their attempts to register have been denied by the same office, due to the group's refusal to leave the Christian Alliance of Cuba and join with a legally recognised denomination that is a member of the

3 In 2022, the average monthly salary in Cuba was 4219 CUP. Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1410707/cuba-average-monthly-income/>

Cuban Council of Churches. The authorities warned the bishop that if Archbishop Rozo attempted to enter Cuba without a religious visa, he would be immediately deported.

The threat of deportation was also used against individuals traveling on government granted religious visas. On 19 May, a Cuban-American pastor arrived on the island at the invitation of a leader associated with a registered Protestant Christian denomination who had obtained a religious visa for them. When the pastor and their minor daughter arrived at immigration at the airport, they were taken by immigration and DSE agents to an office where the pastor was interrogated about their visit and relationship with the inviting pastor.

The agents asked the visiting pastor if they were aware that the inviting church and pastors are counter-revolutionaries and if the visiting pastor had come to help incite a counter-revolution. The visiting pastor stated that they had a religious visa and all their papers were in order, that they had not come to Cuba for political purposes but 'to preach the gospel'. The officers searched the pastor's belongings and confiscated a set of wireless microphones they had brought to donate to the inviting church. When the inviting pastor arrived at the airport searching for the visitors, they were also brought in and interrogated by DSE agents. The officers warned that 'if they wanted to' they could immediately fine the visiting pastor, deport them, and ban them from re-entering Cuba. In the end, however, the officers let all of them go and the visit continued as planned.

Travel inside Cuba

The authorities continued to also enforce restrictions for some individuals in regard to domestic travel. In the first half of the year, a Protestant pastor travelled from central Cuba to eastern Cuba to participate in a multi-day event organised by an unregistered religious group. On the second day of the event, two DSE agents arrived and issued the visiting pastor with a summons for the same day. He complied with the summons and was insulted, interrogated, threatened, and warned that if

...I continued and did not decide to leave [the place] to return to [my place of origin], they would fine me 24,000 CUP.

In fact, the DSE officers issued the pastor an *Acta de Advertencia* for 'disrespect', fined him 5000 CUP, and ordered him to return to his home the following day.

The pastor complied with the order and went back to his place of origin. Ten days later, he was issued with another summons and told that if he failed to obey, he would be jailed for 72 hours and face charges of contempt. The pastor complied with the summons and was again interrogated. A DSE officer told the pastor that should he receive another invitation to return to the province where the event was held, or to any other province with the intention of 'inciting the community of believers and to participate in meetings not authorised by the government', the authorities would proceed with the

threat to fine him 25,000 CUP. The DSE officer added that the pastor's work was 'counter-revolutionary' and said that if the pastor was caught engaging in such work, he would be imprisoned. The pastor replied that he 'was not committing any crime, will not give up anything [he] is doing, which is just pastoral work with the people'.

Attending religious services or activities

The government continued to forcibly prevent individuals, mostly those it considers to be dissidents and their close family members, from attending religious activities. This is part of a long-standing policy of attempting to isolate socially those who are critical of the government.

The government continued particularly to target members of the Ladies in White, consistently stopping them from attending Mass on Sundays. This happened on a weekly basis and in towns and cities across the entire island. Most cases involved the women being detained as they left their homes and held by the police or State Security in various locations until Mass had ended.

Many cases, however, involved more extreme treatment. In one such case, late in the afternoon of 19 March, Annia Zamora Carmenate was on her way to attend Mass in Matanzas when she was detained by an officer who identified himself 'Jonathan' on the public highway in the 10 de Octubre Municipality. She was taken by a car with private DSE plates to the Aguilera PNR Station where she was strip searched. During the process, Ms Zamora Carmenate's genitals were intentionally and unnecessarily touched. In addition, while she was detained, her mobile phone was taken away for 'a routine check'. When it was returned it to her, all of her photos had been deleted and the phone settings had been changed leaving her unable to access her mobile data. She was warned against sharing what had happened on social media and was ordered not to attempt travel to Havana again or be imprisoned. She was released at 8pm.

Family members of political prisoners not affiliated with the Ladies in White were also frequently targeted as part of the policy of social isolation. Marta Perdomo Benítez, mother of Jorge, 40, and Nadir, 39, Martín Perdomo, political prisoners serving six years in Ho Chi Minh Minimum Security Prison and eight in Quivicán Minimum Security Prison respectively, has been banned from attending the Protestant church she has attended since childhood after the pastors were threatened by the DSE.

In early January, Ms Perdomo Benítez was stopped by a group of lay leaders at the Roman Catholic Church in San Jose de las Lajas as she was attempting to enter to attend a religious service. The lay leaders requested that she wait for the priest, who wished to speak to her after the service had ended. In the meeting, the priest explained to Ms Perdomo Benítez that he had been warned by the government not to allow her, or the mother of any person imprisoned in relation to the events of 11 July 2021, to enter the church. He told her that he was powerless to do anything, for fear of government retaliation against him or his congregation.

Later the same month, Ms Perdomo Benítez was summoned by the PNR for questioning. An officer who identified himself as Lieutenant 'Aulentci' threatened that her sons would be transferred to a prison on the other side of the island if she continued to submit requests for them to receive pastoral visits. Ms Perdomo Benítez asked that she be allowed to attend church and pray for her sons and stated that she would continue to attempt to ensure that her sons receive pastoral care. Lieutenant Aulentci responded that

...[the authorities] are not going to allow anyone from any religion to see her sons, or to give provide them with pastoral care, and they will not allow the entry of any type of Christian literature that she intends to send to her sons.

He went on to warn her that

...if she continues to try to find a church where she can pray ... her sons will pay the price.

The authorities sometimes went to great lengths to block family members of political prisoners from participating in religious services. On 2 February, Ailex Marciano Fabelo, mother of the prisoner Ángel Jesús Veliz Marciano, a 29-year-old serving a six-year sentence in Kilo 8 Maximum Security Prison because of his participation in the 11 July 2021 protests, was planning to attend 5pm Mass, officiated by Cardinal Beniamino Stella, former Vatican nuncio to Cuba, at the Camagüey Cathedral. That morning Ms Marciano received a phone call from Lieutenant-Colonel 'Juan Miguel', head of Kilo 8 Maximum Security Prison, informing her that she was required urgently at a 1pm meeting to discuss matters concerning her son. At the same time, Ms Marciano Fabelo noticed that she had received several messages from neighbours alerting her to numerous police heading her way and realised that her house was surrounded by police cars.

Ms Marciano Fabelo left her home and headed to the bus stop with the intention of attending the 1pm meeting at Kilo 8. She was intercepted by DSE officers who informed her that they would escort her to the prison. She got into a police car, but instead of taking her to the prison, she was taken to the Third PNR Station in Monte Carlo, Camagüey where she was held for over two hours, interrogated, and threatened by DSE officers. She was then taken, in the same police car, to Kilo 8 where she met with Lieutenant Colonel Juan Miguel and her son. Over the course of three hours, they discussed various issues related to her son's situation, however, after the meeting ended, Ms Marciano Fabelo was not permitted to leave.

Seven hours after her arrival, Lieutenant Colonel Juan Miguel ordered Ms Marciano Fabelo to be returned to her home. During the journey, she overheard on the officer's radios someone stating 'Dove flew. You can take her home now.' Ms Marciano Fabelo understood the message to be communicating that Cardinal Stella had left Camagüey and

that she had deliberately been prevented from attending Mass. She voiced her frustration to the officers who dropped her off at her house.

The leaders of unregistered religious groups were also affected in their ability to attend religious activities. In October the pastor of an unregistered Protestant denomination attempted to purchase a bus ticket from the state-run bus company Ómnibus Nacionales in order to attend a religious event in another city. The clerk informed the pastor that they were not permitted to sell them a ticket for the bus company or any other type of state-run transport because the pastor had been flagged, in their database, as a 'counter-revolutionary'. The pastor asked to speak to the ticket office manager, who confirmed that the order to bar them from purchasing a ticket had come from the highest levels and involved DSE measures against the pastor. The pastor was unable to secure transport to the event and could not attend.

Arbitrary detention

In 2023, CSW documented 425 cases which involved arbitrary detention. 417 of the documented cases involved members of the Ladies in White to whom, each week, the government continues to devote significant resources to stop from attending Mass and other religious activities. Most of the women were held for a few hours and released after Mass had ended. In many cases, they were confined to a car, parked in the sun, with the windows rolled up. Various women reported government officers ridiculing their faith, warning them that they would 'never' be permitted to attend church services, and threatening that they would be jailed 'like the imprisoned Lady in White, Aymara Nieto Muñoz'.

Berta Soler, the leader of the Ladies in White, and her husband, Angel Moya, were subjected to the same treatment week after week. On a typical Sunday, the couple would attempt to leave their Havana home a little after noon in order to attend Mass. Both would be detained, forced into cars with DSE license plates, and taken to the Aguilera Police Station. Government officers repeatedly attempted to force the couple to undergo a medical examination there, but both Ms Soler and Mr Moya repeatedly refused. Ms Soler would then be transferred to the 11th PNR Station in San Miguel de Padron where she would be confined until the next day in extremely unhygienic conditions in a cell. Mr Moya would be taken to the Guanabacoa PNR Station and confined to a cell, also in poor conditions, until the following day. Both would then be fined and released.

Seven documented cases of arbitrary detention involved the family members of political prisoners or former political prisoners who were detained in order to prevent them from attending a religious activity. In February, two women, Mirka Ibáñez Morales and Maira Arocha Salas, were detained as they each attempted to make their way to the Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria Cathedral in Camagüey to participate in a Mass that was to be presided over by Beniamino Stella, the former Vatican nuncio to Cuba.

Ms Ibáñez Morales, the mother of Yadir Ayala Ibáñez, a 32-year-old political prisoner serving a 10-year sentence in Kilo 8 Maximum Security Prison because of his participation in the 11 July 2021 protests, was arrested by DSE agents two blocks from her home. She was violently forced into a police car where she was held in handcuffs for an hour. She was then taken to an interrogation room at the PNR Station where an officer who identified herself as 'Camila' threatened Ms Ibáñez Morales with the application of provisions in the criminal code regarding illicit meetings and enemy propaganda. Ms Ibáñez Morales was released three hours later.

Ms Arocha Salas, the mother of Liosnel López Arocha, a 33-year old political prisoner serving a 12-year prison sentence in Kilo 7 Maximum Security Prison because of his participation in the 11 July 2021 protests, had been warned the PNR Sector Chief that she would not be permitted to leave her home, however, she managed to go outside, was followed by DSE agents, arrested and taken to the First PNR Station. She was held for two hours and was issued an *Acta de Advertencia*.

In another case, on the evening of 12 April, Ms Marcano Fabelo was waiting with her son's girlfriend and Ms Arocha Salas in front of the La Merced Cathedral in Camagüey to enter to attend to Mass when DSE agents arrested them. The three women were taken to the 3rd Police Station, where they were interrogated by a DSE agent who identified herself as 'Claudia'. Claudia warned them that they were facing one to three years in prison if they did not stop their trying to attend church and told them that 'in the view of the 'system', they are by their actions, inciting counter-revolution and terrorism'. Ms Marcano Fabelo told CSW that

...[the authorities] took away our power to cry out together in prayer before God for our children.

The final documented case was that of a Protestant pastor of an unregistered church in central Cuba who was the target of regular harassment on the part of government officials over the year. In July and August, the pastor was repeatedly summoned or visited in his home by DSE and PNR officers and other government representatives including two Directorate of Housing inspectors. He was threatened with eviction from and the confiscation and demolition of his home, which also acts as his church, and possible imprisonment. He was also warned on one occasion that the content of his sermons was in conflict with the law.

The pastor explained, on each occasion, that he has repeatedly attempted, unsuccessfully, to register his church and has also sought, again unsuccessfully, permission from the Directorate of Housing to carry out the remodelling of his property to facilitate the church meetings held there. The harassment culminated one evening in autumn, as the members of the church were engaged in a prayer vigil during heavy rain and a power outage. Police officers on patrol noticed flashlights being used on the property and

interrupted the service, ordering the pastor to stop the religious activity immediately. The pastor was taken to the local PNR station where he was ordered to provide a statement regarding his 'crime' – he was accused of using the power outage to plan anti-government activities. The pastor was detained overnight in the PNR station. The members of his church regrouped at the PNR station and remained there through the night, praying for the pastor. He was released the following morning.

Political prisoners and FoRB

Political prisoners experienced the routine denial of their rights under the Nelson Mandela Rules (the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners). On 24 March, Yadir Ayala Ibáñez, who was arrested in Camagüey after participating in the nationwide 11 July 2021 protests and is held in the Kilo 8 Maximum Security Prison, was notified that he would not be permitted to attend religious services conducted inside the prison. Mr Ayala Ibáñez, age 33, has also been repeatedly denied the right to receive a visit from a Roman Catholic priest and is not allowed to possess religious literature. On 16 June, Mr Ayala Ibáñez was again denied a visit by a priest. His mother told CSW that she has twice attempted to take religious literature into prison for her son and has not been permitted to do so. According to Mr Ayala Ibáñez, other, non-political prisoners are permitted to receive visits from a religious leader, to keep religious materials, and to attend occasional religious services inside the prison.

Similarly, Luis Emilio Cabrera Diaz, 33, who was also detained in Camagüey a few days after his participation in the 11 July 2021 protests, has repeatedly been denied the right to receive visits from a priest. Mr Cabrera Diaz, who is held in Kilo 9 Maximum Security Prison, has a skin condition requiring medical treatment. Prison authorities have ridiculed his mother's requests that he receive a religious visit and adequate medical attention, asking why he does 'not just pour holy water on himself.' Mr Cabrera Diaz has been encouraged by prison authorities to submit requests for religious visits only to see them refused. On 26 August, Mr Cabrera Diaz was taken to the office of the prison director and instructed to fill out a written application for a religious visit. When Mr Cabrera Diaz asked how long 'he had to play this game', the director responded that it was out of his hands. Mr Cabrera Diaz then asked how long it would take to approve the request and was told by the director that it would be analysed at the DSE headquarters and would not necessarily be approved, as it is a

...benefit for certain inmates, and there is no obligation under the penitentiary regulations that it be extended to all.

The close family members of a number of political prisoners went directly to Roman Catholic leadership in Havana to request religious visits. Elizabeth León, mother of José Antonio Gómez León, 34, Frandy González León, 26, and Santiago Vázquez León, 22, political prisoners held in

the Combinado del Este Prison, Marta Perdomo, and Luis Wilber Aguilar Bravo, father of Walnier Luis Aguilar, age 23 and with additional needs,⁴ a political prisoner being held in Combinado del Este, and Delanis Álvarez Matos, wife of Duniesky Ruiz Cañizares serving a five-year prison sentence in Quivicán Prison, all visited Roman Catholic Cardinal Juan de la Caridad García Rodríguez on separate occasions in Havana and requested his intervention in order that their relatives might receive visits from a religious leader in prison. In each case, the cardinal stated that although he was willing to do so, the government had made it clear that such visits would not be permitted.

Ms León, Ms Perdomo and Mr Aguilar Bravo all received summons following their visits with the cardinal and were subsequently interrogated by PNR and DSE officers who threatened to strip their children of any remaining prison ‘benefits’ unless they stopped requesting religious visits. Ms Álvarez Matos reported that her husband was punished in prison in retaliation for her visit to the cardinal. Mr Aguilar Bravo told CSW

Apparently, for DSE and PNR officers, it is illegal for a desperate father to request religious and spiritual support for his unjustly imprisoned son.

A number of religious leaders imprisoned on and following the 11 July 2021 protests remain in prison. These include Protestant pastor Reverend Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo, Roman Catholic lay leader Angel Mesa, and Afro-Cuban religious leaders Loreto Hernández García and Donaida Perez Paseiro. They, too, report consistent violations of FoRB in the prison, in contravention of the Nelson Mandela Rules, in particular being denied the right to receive religious visits despite, in some cases, repeated and specific requests.

Loreto Hernández García, Donaida Perez Paseiro and two other members of the Association of Free Yorubas, an Afro-Cuban religious group, are serving prison sentences in connection with their participation in the 11 July protests. The group has a long history of being targeted by the government, in part because of their decision to remain independent of Afro-Cuban religious groups with links to the government. Mr Hernández García’s brother Jorge Luis García Perez, also known as Antunez, told CSW that he has been denied critical medical treatment and repeatedly humiliated and ridiculed by prison officials because of his religious beliefs during his time in prison.

Reverend Rosales Fajardo was violently [arrested](#) after participating in peaceful protests that took place across the island on 11 July 2021. He was imprisoned in Boniato Maximum Security Prison from August 2021 until 24 December 2022 and was tried and convicted of charges of ‘disrespect’, ‘assault’, ‘criminal incitement’ and ‘public disorder’ on 20 and 21 December 2021. In December

2022, he was moved to a minimum-security prison near his home in Palma Soriano. In May 2022 he and his family were [informed](#) that he had been sentenced to seven years in prison, one year less than the eight-year sentence that was initially [communicated](#) in a document sent from the Permanent Mission of Cuba in Geneva to the United Nations.

Threats

Almost all of the FoRB violations documented in 2023 included some kind of threat. These included threats of imprisonment or the loss of custody of children if the targets did not comply with the demands of the government as communicated by State Security. Members of the Ladies in White were threatened weekly with imprisonment or other unspecified ‘consequences’ if they continued to attempt to attend church. There was also a notable increase in the number of documented cases involving an *Acta de Advertencia* in which an individual is asked to sign a document justifying their future arrest or other actions, such as the demolition of a building used for religious purposes, should they commit crimes laid out in the document. Religious leaders of unregistered religious groups were repeatedly targeted in this way, with *Actas de Advertencia* warning of imprisonment, in line with the Criminal Code, of up to three years for leading an unauthorised association.

In one such case, in the first quarter of 2023 a PNR officer delivered an immediate summons to the Protestant pastor of an unregistered religious association in central Cuba. The PNR officer then accompanied the pastor to the PNR station where the pastor was interrogated, threatened, and issued an *Acta de Advertencia*. The document stated that the pastor oversees an illegal church, and he is inciting people to join the counter-revolution. The officers present told the pastor that if he continued his work as a pastor, he would be fined 15,000 CUP and imprisoned for up to three years. They specifically mentioned humanitarian work carried out by his church, providing financial support and meals to families in need. The pastor refused to sign the *Acta de Advertencia*, stating that he would like to legalise his church, if they will permit him to do so, and he wants to honour the authorities, but he will not renounce his ‘calling’ because he is committed to God and to helping those in need.

In another case, in the second half of the year, an Abakuá leader went to his local PNR Sector Station in compliance with a summons he had received. The PNR Sector Chief presented the leader with an *Acta de Advertencia*, which stated that the leader was facing criminal prosecution because he has continued to engage in religious rituals which the authorities have decided ‘incite violence’. The Abakuá leader attempted to explain the purpose of the rituals, and that violence was not involved, but was ignored. He refused to sign the document and left the station.

In almost all of these cases, the religious leader being threatened attempted to explain or even challenged the

⁴ Walnier Luis Aguilar has mild intellectual and developmental challenges, with a multifactorial condition, a learning and behavioral disorder due to a head injury as a child.

authorities. In the first half of the year, the pastor of an unregistered denomination in Havana went to a PNR station in compliance with a summons that had been delivered to him by two DSE agents. At the station, he was met by a captain who reminded him that he leads an 'illegal' congregation, and because he is not authorized to hold services, he is committing the crime of disrespect for the authorities. The captain emphasised that the pastor's case is particularly serious because of his link to a larger network of churches and a specific leader, who the government considers to be

...counter-revolutionary, a person who is unfriendly to the government, with an illegal ministry inside Cuba.

The pastor responded by asking the captain what specific crime the named leader had committed aside from preaching and leading a church in a nearby city. He asked the captain to tell him 'to which government offices office he should go, what paper he should sign and what taxes he should pay' in order for the government to legalise his church.

The captain threatened the pastor with retaliation against him, the members of his congregation, and the church premises which is also the pastor's home. The captain warned that members of his church would be sacked from their places of employment and prosecuted for disrespect for the authorities and issued him an *Acta de Advertencia*. The pastor refused to sign it, saying it was full of 'lies and insults' and left.

In many cases threats of prosecution and imprisonment were issued verbally. In the first half of the year, a pastor associated with the Apostolic Movement in central Cuba was visited in his home by an individual wearing civilian clothes, who identified himself as a DSE agent, but did not give his name. The agent began to interrogate the pastor, asking about his various responsibilities as a pastor, the tasks he routinely carried out, and, given that the agent understood the pastor's church to be 'illegal', why they met for worship services each Sunday. The agent warned the pastor that by holding such services, he was committing a crime and could be fined and prosecuted for disrespect for the authorities. The agent added that in the act of gathering so many people together in one place, he was inciting them to join the counter-revolution. When the pastor made it clear that he did not intend to stop, the agent stated that the visit was a warning, and that the next time he would return with a summons.

A number of cases also involved the threat of demolition of a place of worship. In the first half of the year, in Camagüey Province, DSE agents visited the home of the Protestant pastor of an unregistered religious group. The pastor told CSW that the agents warned him that his congregation is illegal and is linked to an international denomination that the government has identified as 'counter-revolutionary'.

They threatened to demolish the church and to prosecute the pastor if he did not break ties with the denomination.

The leaders of registered religious groups also reported regularly receiving threats, including threats of demolition or the forced closure of their place of worship. In one case, in the fourth quarter of the year, DSE agents paid an unannounced visit to the home of the pastor of a legal church associated with a registered Protestant denomination. The agents ordered the pastor that the church must stop singing during worship services as they make too much noise. The pastor responded that his church is legal, part of a registered denomination, and has been present at its location for many years. He expressed a willingness to be careful with the sound levels but stated that they would not stop singing as this is a fundamental part of their worship and faith. He also requested that the authorities visit the church to measure the noise levels with appropriate equipment. The agents warned the pastor that if he did not comply, they would shut down the church and confiscate all audio equipment. The pastor noted that the equipment had all been obtained legally and questioned why DSE agents were dealing with a matter involving sound levels, rather than the PNR or an official from a more relevant government body. He reiterated that

...neither I nor my congregants will forsake the essential practices of our faith, which involve worshiping and praising the name of our Lord,' and that if this is a problem, you [the authorities] should proceed with whatever measures you deem necessary.

Discrimination on the basis of religion

CSW noted an increase in the number and severity of cases involving discrimination against children because of their religion or belief, or that of their parents. In one case, in April, the parents of a 15-month-old child were called to a meeting with the director of the local state-run day care. They were informed that the toddler's registration had been denied due to the fact that the mother had been fired from her job because of her husband's leadership of an unregistered church and participation in the Christian Alliance of Cuba. The director told the parents that the order had come from above, explaining that day care is

...the exclusive right of the children of true revolutionaries who support the government, not for those whose parents are against it.

School children are expected to participate in daily political activities including singing pro-government songs and reciting chants declaring their allegiance to deceased leaders, like 'with the guidance of Fidel, for the country and Socialism, Moncadists⁵ always ready, pioneers for communism, we will be like Che.' This poses a particular

5 A reference to the unsuccessful 1953 attack on the Moncada Barracks led by Fidel Castro, generally considered to be the start of the Cuban Revolution.

problem for Jehovah's Witnesses who believe that their allegiance is to God alone, and therefore do not participate in political acts including the singing of national anthems, or salute flags. Jehovah's Witness children are often singled out for ridicule and organised bullying.

One Jehovah's Witness parent filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor's office in her city in eastern Cuba, in which she accused teachers at her children's school of subjecting them to physical and verbal abuse because they do not wear the school uniform, sing the national anthem or pay tribute to patriotic symbols. The prosecutor's office rejected her complaint on the basis that Cuba 'has no judicial mechanisms to address complaints related to FoRB violations.' The parent, fearing for the children's well-being, kept them out of school for two months before finally moving to a different city across the country.

In another case, a parent and their ten-year old child, both Jehovah's Witnesses, were summoned to a meeting at the child's school in eastern Cuba. They obeyed the summons and were met by the school directors, officers from the government run Diagnostic and Observation Centre (DaOC) who did not identify themselves, and the PNR Sector Chief. The school directors explained that after the child refused, on multiple occasions, to salute the flag or sing the national anthem, they had requested the intervention of the DaOC. The DaOC investigators present at the meeting accused the parent and the child of being counter-revolutionaries and stated that the DaOC had made the decision to fail the child in their grade because their refusal to salute the flag or sing the national anthem 'was equivalent to not knowing the answer to two plus two'. The parent told CSW that the child also experienced regular physical and verbal abuse at the school, with the child's teacher encouraging fellow students to hit the child and call them a 'parasite and a worm'. The meeting concluded with the PNR Sector Chief informing the parent and child that they had been declared to be 'illegal' in the municipality. He ordered them to move to a city in eastern Cuba, where the parent was originally from.

Children of other faiths were similarly affected. In July, the pastor of an unregistered Protestant church and his wife in the western part of the island were verbally reprimanded by the head of the CCP unit and the child psychologist at their nine-year old child's school after they refused to allow the child to participate in political activities during the school's daily morning sessions. The pastor told CSW that since 2021, the child has been harassed by both school authorities and their classmates because of their faith. The family expects the situation to grow worse as this year as

...the Ministry of Education has made readjustments in the curricula... Much more political content will be used in each of the subjects. This makes things even more difficult because obviously the more the principles of communism are taught in each

subject, the more problems of conscience [for] our child...

Similarly, in October a primary school director summoned the parents of a five-year-old child because the child refused to repeat a phrase declaring allegiance to Fidel Castro, socialism, communism, and Che Guevara, which is required upon completion of pre-school and induction into the José Martí Pioneer Organization. The parents were issued and required to sign another summons to appear six days later at the Directorate of Education (DoE) in their municipality, where, they were told, they would be presented with the results of an 'analysis of the attitude' of the child and a decision on whether or not the child would be permitted to remain at school. Following this first meeting, the five-year-old was moved each day from their usual seat and sometimes forced to sit alone at a table.

At the second meeting at the DoE, officers told the parents that they had examined the child's 'inappropriate behaviour', namely their refusal to 'participate in political or revolutionary acts, such as the traditional ritual of receiving the [pioneer] scarf, to [participate in] protests as a pioneer', and to repeat patriotic chants. The parents were told that 'religion is not permitted in Cuban schools which focus on the ideal of the socialist state', and that a mandatory part of their education was to teach a love for country and attachment to the ideals of Che Guevara and Fidel and Raúl Castro. The officers went on to tell the parents that whatever their religious beliefs, their child was required to participate in all activities, even if they conflict with their beliefs, and concluded by stating that, if they did not agree, the family should leave Cuba. The father of the child, a Protestant pastor affiliated with a registered denomination expressed concern about their future, stating

...once again, our freedom of religion and conscience is violated. Our rights over our children are violated. No one can be forced to abide by an ideology when it denies religious faith. We feel ... defenceless in the face of uncertainty about what might happen in the future if we refuse to allow our [child] to continue under an educational system like this [one].

He also told CSW that he has observed an impact on the mental health of the five-year-old, who no longer wants to attend school.

Adult members of religious groups routinely experience discrimination in various forms. These are most clearly seen in places of employment. Individuals can be passed over for promotion, excluded from important meetings and activities, or demoted or transferred to undesirable locations because their religious affiliation makes them 'untrustworthy'. In one such case, in December, a woman was informed that she was being made redundant with immediate effect, due to her membership of an unregistered

church led by a pastor considered by the government to be counter-revolutionary, according to the director at her place of employment. When the woman protested, noting that her employment reviews had always given her an 'excellent' rating, the director told her his team could not include 'someone known to be a member of ... an illegal church, which is against the principles of the Revolution,' because her job allowed her access to information about state-run companies. The director handed her a letter detailing the redundancy and signed by two executives and told her to go home. The source told CSW that the woman's family, which includes three young children, was left in a precarious economic situation with the loss of her income. She had received no prior warning.

In November, one driver who works for Ómnibus Nacionales was demoted and threatened with the loss of his job. Another was sacked because religious leaders had hired the services of a buses in order to attend an unauthorised inter-denominational religious gathering in another part of the country. In both cases, the bus services were contracted by the passengers in line with standard procedures, including paying associated taxes via the bus company offices. Both drivers also attend unregistered churches, a fact that was brought up as evidence against them during the meetings.

In the first case, the manager informed the driver that

...the provision of services using a state-owned vehicle is restricted to revolutionaries, not to people who practice this type of [unauthorised] belief.

The manager went on to complain that the company had not been aware that the driver belonged to an illegal church, nor that he had provided services to individuals planning counter-revolutionary events.

The driver was informed that he was, with immediate effect, suspended from his job for six months, and if he continued to engage with unrecognised Christian groups, he would be sacked. In addition, the driver would no longer allowed be allowed to drive buses but would be assigned to cleaning them instead. When the driver responded that he would not stop attending his church the manager threw him out of the office after giving him a document notifying him that he was banned from driving and would be assigned to an unspecified position.

The second driver was informed that he had been sacked in a meeting with the local director for Ómnibus Nacionales and the local Transport Union secretary general. The director told the driver that providing

...a service of that type on a state bus, to carry out a counter-revolutionary act, was unacceptable and that you, as the driver, should have notified someone before agreeing [to take the passengers to their destination].

The driver was told that if he refused to collaborate and report any case of religious leaders attempting to use the bus service, he would be sacked. He responded that he would be unable to act in conflict with his conscience and that he would not deny his faith. The union secretary general then informed the driver that he was, with immediate effect, expelled from the union because of his failure to defend revolutionary principles. The driver replied that he thought that the purpose of the union was to defend the workers, not the revolutionaries, but he was grateful, in any case, to them for the years that he had been permitted to belong to the union, and accepted the printed notification of his sacking.

Those not working for state-run companies were not immune from government discrimination. In August, a pastor who leads an unregistered church in central Cuba, and who makes a living by working as a bricklayer, was visited by a PNR officer who did not give his name but asked him to present documentation proving that he was authorised to carry out work as bricklayer. The PNR officer warned the pastor that he would not be permitted to continue in this work and that he could be charged with illicit enrichment and practicing a profession without legal permits, especially if he carried on with his pastoral work, including the provision of humanitarian aid in the community. The pastor has not worked as a bricklayer since then.

Similarly, in June, a pastor associated with the Apostolic Movement who earns a living by fishing, was summoned and threatened by a DSE officer with the loss of his fishing license if he did not give up his work as a pastor, close the 'Houses of Prayer' that he oversees, and cease his evangelism work in his community. The DSE agent accused him of inciting young people not to join revolutionary organisations and dismissed the pastor without allowing him to respond. Around ten days later, when the pastor went to the Ministry of the Food Industry National State Inspection Office (ONIE) to renew his fishing permit, he was informed by the head of office, who did not give his name, that his fishing licenses had been suspended and 'he would never be allowed to set foot on a boat again'. The head of office stated that the suspension had been ordered by the DSE and that until the pastor 'addressed the issues' raised by the DSE, he would not be allowed to fish. The pastor responded that, despite the consequences, he would carry on with his pastoral work and left.

Conclusion

2023 saw the government maintain its repression in almost every area and FoRB was no exception. Government tactics can be compared to those of the 1980s and 1990s with aggressive attempts to socially isolate political prisoners and their families, harassment and threats of imprisonment, including the frequent use of *Actas de Advertencia* against the leaders of unregistered religious groups, repeated summons and interrogations, restrictions on movement, abuse of children and/or loss of employment because of the religious beliefs of the affected individuals. Revised civil, administrative, and criminal codes were repeatedly referenced by government officials which appears to confirm

the government's attempt to return to a policy of tight social control.

The message is clear. The Cuban people can expect no political or social reform and any dissent or perceived criticism of the government, the CCP, or its policies will be met with a heavy hand. While many Cubans have continued to find ways to resist and have not refrained from criticising government policies or actions with which they disagree, have concluded they have no future in Cuba and are fleeing the island by the hundreds of thousands in order to seek sanctuary elsewhere, almost always via routes that imply great physical risk and expense.⁶ The government is apparently at least tolerating if not facilitating mass emigration, as it has in the past, almost always during or following a period of social unrest. The wave beginning in the latter half of 2021 up to today is unlike any prior such movement of people in the country's history.

Under the leadership of President Miguel Díaz-Canel y Bermúdez, the CCP and government of Cuba are constructing a new version of its repressive past. They have aggressively solicited, apparently successfully, the support of similarly repressive governments in China and Russia.⁷ This should be of great concern to members of the international community who are committed to democracy and respect for fundamental human rights.

It is now even more vital that governments around the world, and especially Cuba's friends and neighbours in Latin America, emphatically voice concerns about Cuba's consistent violations of human rights, including FoRB, and seek ways to support independent civil society in Cuba, including religious groups. The European Union and the United States, for their part, must actively seek ways to coordinate with each other and engage with other governments, especially those in the Western Hemisphere, to ensure that demands that the Cuban government make long overdue reforms to ensure that the fundamental rights of all are protected and upheld are made consistently and in unison. Ultimately the future of Cuba lies with its people; those around the world who believe in the principles of democracy and fundamental human rights must stand with them in their peaceful pursuit of political and social change.

6 Most Cuban fleeing the island do so by sea on makeshift or rickety vessels or by land, traveling by air to Nicaragua which removed the visa requirement for Cubans in November 2021, in apparent agreement with the Cuban government, and continuing their journey by land to the United States, often paying human trafficking networks considerable sums to get them to the border.

7 China's Xi pledges support for Cuba on 'core interests' Associated Press 25 November 2022 <https://apnews.com/article/europe-china-cuba-diplomacy-beijing-dedcf1ce9138278b5ac5843070036398>

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